

New Orleans Pelicans' Ryan Anderson's return from severe neck injury nothing short of miraculous

ryan anderson

New Orleans Pelicans forward Ryan Anderson flashes a thumb-up while being taken off the court on a stretcher following an injury during the second half of an NBA basketball game against the Boston Celtics, Friday, Jan. 3, 2014, in Boston. The Celtics said a preliminary diagnosis indicated suffered a "cervical stinger." The Pelicans defeated the Celtics 95-92. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

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Eight months ago, it appeared **New Orleans Pelicans** forward **Ryan Anderson's** surging NBA career was in jeopardy after he was blindsided in a jarring collision with Boston Celtics forward Gerald Wallace.

In a frightening scene on Jan. 3 at Boston's TD Garden Arena, Anderson was carted off the court on a stretcher with his head immobilized.

He suffered two herniated discs in his neck, missed the final 43 games of the 2014 season and underwent major surgery on his cervical region in April.

Now, Anderson's comeback from the severe injury is nothing short of miraculous, considering that he was expected to take up to six months to recover following his surgery in April. He wasn't cleared to begin physical therapy or run until mid-July.

But he's ahead of schedule, set to begin training camp without limitations. He's back shooting jump shots on the move and going through agility drills at full speed with his teammates in off-season volunteer workouts at the team's practice facility in Metairie.

"This process could have been so much worse," said Anderson, who did most of his rehabilitation work in Sacramento, Calif., his hometown. "I'm very grateful to my physical therapists and doctors that got me to this point. I've just tried to push myself and kind of read my body.

"Nothing I was doing through physical therapy bothered me, so progression happened pretty quick."

When Anderson, 26, got clearance by his doctors to begin rehabilitation work, he was restricted to light cardio work. By mid-August, he was cleared to start basketball work that mostly involved shooting drills. Anderson was so eager to work, so he could start training camp on time, he joined a 24-hour fitness gym, so he could work after hours.

Anderson, 6-feet-10, 240 pounds, is one of the top 3-point shooting stretch power forwards in the NBA. Before his injury, he was averaging a career-high 19.8 points after 22 games last season. And Anderson's 36.1 minutes per game average was also a career high.

Aiming to make a similar impact this upcoming season, Anderson announced two weeks ago, he had been medically cleared by his doctors for contact work. Still, the Pelicans held him out from participating in five-on-five scrimmage work last week.

That could change later this week when coach Monty Williams is expected to make a decision after he is evaluated by Carlos Daniel, the team's director of player development.

"We're waiting on Carlos to re-evaluate him from a strength standpoint," Pelicans lead assistant Randy Ayers said. "I think they will like what they see from a physical standpoint. "He has stayed the course. His on-court work has been good. His shot

New Orleans Pelicans' Ryan Anderson talks about his return|Video

Ryan Anderson not expected to be limited when training camp opens on Sept. 30.

has been consistent."

Anderson appears to have little fear of re-injuring himself. There have been no setbacks. However, Anderson acknowledged last week he has occasionally experiences a tingling sensation in his fingers.

"The only time I feel anything is maybe when I sleep wrong on my neck," Anderson said. "I feel like I have to work a little kinks out when I get up. But it's nothing. Honestly, my neck feels better than it did before I got hurt."

Several months after Anderson was injured, he experienced difficulty with his range of motion and he had recurring pain that shot from his elbows to his fingers. Anderson and the Pelicans took a cautious approach, though. In March, Anderson spoke to various doctors to gather information to help determine the next appropriate next step.

When the pain wouldn't subside, the Pelicans announced in late March that Anderson would undergo neck surgery in April, declaring it was the best option for a full recovery. Anderson's surgery was performed by Dr. Robert Watkins in Los Angeles. Watkins also performed surgery on Denver Broncos quarterback Payton Manning in 2011 for a one-level cervical neck fusion that allowed him to resume his career.

Anderson's lone reminder of his surgery is a half-inch red scar in front of his neck, where Watkins went through to perform the procedure.

The Pelicans' playoff aspirations last season virtually ended in January after Anderson, point guard Jrue Holiday (stress fracture in right tibia) and forward/center Jason Smith (knee) were all lost for the remainder of the season after requiring season-ending surgeries. Without having Anderson's ability to stretch defenses, the Pelicans fared 19-32 the rest of the way before finishing the season at 34-48.

Now other than Smith, who signed a free agent deal with the New York Knicks this summer, they are all on schedule to be fully recovered in time for the start of training camp.

Starting shooting guard Eric Gordon missed the final 14 games because of a left knee injury that required surgery in April. Swingman Tyreke Evans underwent off-season arthroscopic surgery in May to clean out scar tissue in his right knee despite playing in 72 games and averaging 14.5 points.

Ryan Anderson eager to begin New Orleans Pelicans training camp healthy: video

Rachel Whittaker interviews Pelicans forward Ryan Anderson about his recovery from neck surgery and the team's outlook as the regular season begins Oct. 28. Tickets for that opening game vs. Orlando are now on sale.

Anderson acknowledges it was tough sitting out most of last season, but it wasn't entirely bad.

"It was really a tough year," said Anderson, whose girlfriend, Gia Allemand, committed suicide last year, two months before the season started. "It was something for me, but that injury really helped me put things in perspective.

"It gave me an opportunity to just back and re-evaluate things. It helped me definitely regain that passion for the game. Like right now, I'm so excited to get back on the court. I'm so excited to be doing workouts."